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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR VISITS PORT CITY OF ADEN

REF: SANAA 2961

1. Summary: On October 2, Ambassador visited Aden to meet with local government, business and civil society representatives. Local council members, the Chamber of Commerce, and NGOs shared their experiences in strengthening democracy, improving the business climate, and creating local solutions to challenges facing the vibrant port city. The Ambassador also met with the local UNHCR director to become better acquainted with how the organization is dealing with an ever-increasing number of refugees from the Horn of Africa. End Summary.

Aden Councils: Developing Local Government

2. Ambassador met with Deputy Governor Abdul Karim Shaef, who also serves as the Secretary General for Local Councils, to discuss the importance of local government in supporting democratic development. The Ambassador said the USG supports local councils and their efforts to improve security and encourage economic growth. He stressed that the onus is on local government to create a favorable climate to attract investment.

3. Shaef said the 2001 local council elections were successful, although there were many difficulties starting this system from scratch and securing the necessary funding. "Now the relationship with the central government is strong," he continued, and local councils manage their own budgets and oversee infrastructure projects. Shaef also described a project with the World Bank to develop the seaport and airport in order to create jobs and develop tourism. He expressed concern that a lack of economic opportunities will lead to civil unrest and recruitment by extremist elements.

4. Following the meeting with Shaef, the Ambassador met with twenty local council members representing all major political parties to gather perspectives on elections, decentralization, public finance, and the economic future of the port. Council members demonstrated great pride in their close relationship with constituents and the responsibilities that entails. Members felt their effectiveness was impeded, however, by a lack of fiscal autonomy and their reliance on allocations from the Ministry of Finance to fund operations and projects. Council members asked for help making connections with American local government leaders, so they could learn from America's democratic experience. Ambassador said the exchange of information and expertise with their American counterparts would be very valuable. He stressed that democracy cannot succeed without strong local governments to secure political freedoms and encourage economic development.

Chamber of Commerce: Bring American Companies Back!

5. Ambassador visited the Aden Chamber of Commerce to meet with local business leaders and stress the importance of a thriving private sector in creating a secure and prosperous Aden. He called on business leaders to work with local councils to help create conditions friendly for business. Business leaders were enthusiastic about forming relationships with American companies and chambers of commerce, noting that an American trade delegation had not visited Aden since 1973. The Ambassador encouraged the Chamber of Commerce to work with post to develop relationships with American companies and educate them on potential investment opportunities.

UNHCR: Providing for Somali Refugees

6. Local UNHCR representative Theophilus Vodounou described the current refugee situation and the organization's efforts to assist the thousands of new refugees who arrive each year. Vodounou said most refugees arriving in Yemen are young males fleeing poor economic conditions in Somalia and Ethiopia. They typically pay armed Somali smugglers \$10 - \$20 dollars to ferry them in unsafe boats from Bossaso, Somalia to the Bir-Ali coast, located 510 km from Aden. UNHCR provides food and medical attention at the nearby Mayfa Reception Center, and then transports them to Kharaz refugee

camp outside of Aden. The refugee camp's population is 7,525 and growing, but Vodounou said most chose to leave the camp and seek employment elsewhere in Yemen or other countries on the Arabian Peninsula. UNHCR currently has 74,864 registered refugees, the vast majority of which are from Somalia. Vodounou estimated that twice the registered number have entered Yemen illegally within the last ten years.

17. Vodounou also described efforts to improve living conditions in the Aden suburb of Basateen, which is home to 14,000 refugees. Living conditions are poor, as the population has expanded well beyond what the current infrastructure can handle. According to Vodounou, the central government views the area as a haven for criminals and would like to move the residents to the Kharaz camp. Local authorities, however, are cooperating with UNHCR to improve basic services, like sanitation, and provide economic opportunities to residents. Vodounou thanked the USG for providing a new water tank to Basateen residents.

Women's Groups

18. Ambassador and Mrs. Krajieski also met with several NGOs providing valuable services to the women and children of Aden. At the Women's Shelter House, Executive Director Afra Hariri described the shelter's efforts to provide a safe haven for battered women. The shelter provides legal support, housing, medical care, and job training to victims of violence. Hariri said that without support from the shelter, the only organization of its kind in Yemen, these women are vulnerable to being trafficked into prostitution. Hariri can currently only house six women, but hopes to expand the facilities in Aden, as well as creating similar shelters in Taiz, Hodeida, and Mukalla.

19. Mrs. Krajieski met with Fatima Muraisi, local council member and Chairperson of the Yemeni Woman's Union (YWU) Aden Branch. YWU, a nominally independent NGO that maintains a strong relationship with the government, focuses on providing legal support to female prisoners, conducting health awareness campaigns, and improving female literacy.

110. The Ambassador's wife also toured two facilities that received USG assistance, including a secondary school for girls and a school for blind children. At the girls' school, she observed students using the e-Learning Center created with funds from the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI). The successful center provides a vibrant learning environment and encourages young girls to seek additional educational opportunities. The elementary school for blind children, which educates 20 students and prepares them for reintegration into normal classrooms, expressed appreciation for USG support for much needed renovations.

Public Diplomacy Success

11. All news outlets reported on Ambassador Krajieski's visit to Aden. Many summary articles carried photos and positive reports about his meetings. Aden-based independently daily Al Ayyam carried an in-depth interview on October 6 (reftel).

Krajieski